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AUTHOR Page, William D.
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ABSTRACT

Five speculations can be made about basal-series reading instruction: if it sells well, it may be bad; basal series may be based on marketing principles rather than educational principles; possession of a basal series by a school district tells little or nothing about the instruction in the school district that owns it; stories in basal series readers may not progress in reading difficulty from easy to hard; and basal reader teachers' manuals may be impossible to follow. Suggestions concerning how basal reading series should be constructed include the following: (1) they ought to reflect sound educational principles; (2) the stories should progress from easy to hard; (3) promotional materials should not mislead teachers into thinking that the manuals can be followed without making crucial teaching decisions; (4) how well the materials sell should not be used as the only measure of the quality of the series; and (5) it should not be assumed that the purchase, adoption, and possession of a basal reader series is conclusive evidence that teachers are carrying out what is prescribed in the teachers' manuals. Publishers and educators need to cooperate in providing solutions if reading instruction in the United States is to be improved. (JF)

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TEACHERS' DECISIONS AND
BASAL READER TEACHERS' MANUALS

By
William D. Page
University of Connecticut

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Introduction

A basal reader series is not a book. It is a system. At its heart is an anthology. Stories are written, adapted and selected; bound in separate books usually designated by grade level, and assumed to progress from easy to hard according to the designated grade levels. Grade levels are usually designated PP for pre-primer, P for primer, 1² for the second half of first grade, 2¹ for the first half of second grade, and so on through 2², 3¹, 3², 4, 5, and 6. A basal-series often includes consummable workbooks, pre-tests, post-tests, supplemental phonics and word recognition programs, enrichment readers, games, correlated skills instruction materials, management and record-keeping devices, storage boxes, and nearly always - a teacher's manual.

Chall (1967, p. 189) states, "... for all practical purposes American reading instruction is basal-series reading instruction." This statement is probably as true today as it was when it was written, and stands as a warrant for expending the effort to examine basal series. The teacher's manuals that accompany basal series could be among the most influential devices that affect teachers' decisions in reading instruction today. With a referent for a basal series out in the open, consider the speculations that follow and their implications.

If a particular basal series sells well, it is probably not very good. This shocking speculation is antithetical to

the principle the publishing industry understandably tends to tout as the bottom line for making decisions about what to publish. A corollary speculation is that if a particular basal series does not sell well, there is at least an outside chance that it might be good. By 'good' we mean that the basal series is based on sound educational principles which result from the best thinking science offers.

A second speculation, if it were true, might be used to support the first speculation to some degree. The second speculation is that basal-reader series are based primarily on marketing principles, which in turn reflect tradition; and sound educational principles may actually run a weak third or fourth place. Other considerations certainly may play a part. The purposes which direct Federal monies are an influence and may reflect political concerns. The actual costs of printed materials, and changes in the economic environment play a part. However, our speculation stands as an idea that warrants study. Marketing principles may outweigh educational principles in the construction of a basal reader.

A third speculation relates directly to the kinds of assumptions researchers might make about reading instruction, particularly researchers who lack direct experience teaching reading in conventional classroom situations. The speculation is that the purchase, possession, and stated adoption of a particular basal series by a school district tells very little about what is happening in reading instruction in that district. Although it tells little about the district, it tells even

less about reading instruction at the building level, less than that about the particular classroom, and nearly nothing about an individual student's possible experiences in reading instruction.

Two additional speculations relate to assumptions often made about basal series. It is normally assumed that basal series begin with easy stories in the early grades and progress to harder stories in the later grades. We speculate here that this may not be the case. A second widely held assumption about basal-series teachers' manuals is that they can be followed in some kind of step-by-step manner and that the result will be effective reading instruction. We speculate here that few, if any, basal-reader teachers' manuals can be followed.

Our five speculations about basal series appear as follows. If it sells well, it may be bad. Basal series may be based on marketing principles rather than educational principles. Possession of a basal series by a school district tells little or nothing about the instruction in the school district that owns it. Stories in basal readers may not progress from easy to hard. Basal-reader teachers' manuals may be impossible to follow.

It is one thing to speculate about basal-reader series and their teachers' manuals, but it is quite another thing to provide the warrants that might persuade people to examine the speculation seriously. Serious doubt accompanies each of these speculations. If any of them are true, we would have to do some hurried and drastic rethinking of what is going on in

reading instruction in the United States today.

It is difficult to determine the exact extent to which basal-reading series are influenced by marketing principles. If we consider motivation, we might say a very high degree is likely. Over ten years ago it was estimated that between ten and twenty million dollars (Chall, 1967) are invested in the creation and production of a basal reader series. Such a substantial investment logically guarantees motivation to sell the basal series. When basals do not sell, editors are forced to seek other positions.

There is motivation to sell the product. How does that relate to the first speculation that if it sells it is probably bad? First, we have no reason to believe that sound, educational principles are in accord with sound marketing principles. The goals of education center about helping people to become the best persons they can, and in reading that means learning to reconstruct the author's message from printed language. The goal of marketing is to sell a product, to get users to choose and pay for the product.

Using Sales as an Indicator of Value

What support exists for the speculation that if a basal reader sells well it may be bad? Try this. If a basal reader sells well it is probably based on marketing principles. If marketing principles conflict with sound educational theory, it remains that educational principles, not marketing principles, are what basal reading series should reflect.

One way to market a product is to persuade potential buyers that the product warrants purchase. Publishers appear to have done this quite effectively. Chall (1967) suggests that basal reading series may have been oversold to teachers and school principals.

A second way to market a product is to shape the product into what the potential buyers indicate they desire. Parents buy very few basal readers. Student learners usually do not purchase them. Professors of reading education write them and get them free, but they seldom buy them. Who, then, buys basal readers? School district purchasing agents sign the purchase contracts for the lion's share of basal readers. However, purchasing agents are following directives of school district administrators, who, in turn, probably survey their teachers' interests and concerns.

Elementary school teachers usually take one course in language arts and reading, one course in children's literature, and practice teaching in preparation for teaching reading. Most teachers and professors of reading education probably agree that this preparation is minimal, for either teaching or deciding what to buy as a basal reader. It is this group, minimally prepared teachers, who make up the market for basal readers. Do publishers shape their basal-reader series to fit what this group indicates it wants? We speculate here that they probably do. As a result, it is quite possible that basal readers are constructed on the basis of marketing principles which reflect tradition and what teachers who are minimally

prepared to teach reading say they want. According to Barton and Wilder (1964) nearly half of the reading experts in their sample believed that the teaching suggestions in basal readers did not reflect scientifically valid knowledge.

What ideas are reflected in a marketing principle that struggles to shape the product to fit the interest of those who decide to buy or not to buy? In reading, it is possible, and probable, that tradition plays a strong role. Teachers tend to teach as they were taught. Supervising teachers in practice teaching may serve to help continue traditions. In reading instruction there is no lack of tradition, as Nila Banton Smith's American Reading Instruction (1965) suggests.

Viewing Instruction from the Outside

The fidelity with which basal readers are followed is the focus of two speculations. First, the possession of a basal reader tells us little about the actual instruction youngsters receive, and second, perhaps basal-reader teachers' manuals can not be followed.

Not much evidence is available on the relationship between what is sold and what the results in reading achievement turn out to be. Gage and Winne (1975) indicate that relationships between observations of teaching and achievement test scores of students are weak. Bond and Dykstra (1967) and Dykstra (1967) found few important differences between topics touted as methods by different basal-reader series. Tests are not totally believable. For instance, often tests are out of phase with what is being taught. Tyler (1974, p. 146) notes, "A test designed

for use in the first grade that properly reflects the curriculum sequence of a "look-say" approach would be inappropriate as a measure of what pupils had learned who were receiving initial training in phonics or vice versa." If the bottom line is comprehending printed language, tests are in great difficulty. Tuinman (1973) suggests our comprehension tests are not passage dependent; that is, youngsters can answer the questions without reading the passages to which the questions refer. What we are really testing with tests labeled 'reading comprehension' is not entirely clear. Carroll (1972, p. 3) suggests "....most presently available tests do not permit a satisfactory assessment of the individual's 'absolute' level of comprehension ability." Only the teacher knows what he or she thinks minute by minute as teaching occurs. Perhaps it is only the teacher who knows what kind of teaching occurs; what purposes are being met, and how basal-reader teachers' manuals are used.

Following the Basal Reader

At the end of the minimal preparation for reading instruction, one course in language arts, one course in children's literature, and practice teaching, it is often the case that teachers are told to "follow the basal reader" in conducting reading instruction, at least until they "get their feet wet." Teachers' feet get very wet indeed trying to follow the basal reader.

The major pedagogical device provided for teachers in a basal-reader series is the directed-reading lesson. The directed-reading lesson usually includes some provision for motivation,

vocabulary introduction, guided silent reading, skill development, and extension activities. The provisions for motivation and vocabulary introduction are usually tied directly to the introduction of the story. Skill development and extension activities usually appear as options. The teacher's manuals suggest pages to be used in the workbook as well as activities to be carried out that are not in the workbook.

The number of options suggested along with each story is usually very large. If a teacher tried to "cover the material" in some teachers' manuals, a single grade level could require several times the amount of time the youngsters are actually in school in a single year.

The perennial curriculum problem is thrummed into consciousness. Teachers must decide what to teach in reading. With a preponderance of options and a limited amount of time, teachers must reject for teaching many more options than they can select for teaching. Basal-series teachers' manuals offer little help with this decision. Minimally prepared teachers have few resources to draw upon to make this decision. Basal-reading series that promise that they can be followed may be quite misleading. They may not actually point out in explicit ways that teachers face an enormous number of curricular decisions on a day-to-day basis in order to follow the basal reader.

Assessing the Linguistic Complexity of Basal Readers

The stories in basal readers usually are assumed to progress

from easy to hard according to the designations of publishers. Another way of saying this is that the readability of the materials is assumed to be appropriate for the grade levels designated. We question this assumption on the basis of three kinds of evidence.

First, publishers seldom make themselves clear about how the grade level of material is established. This is understandable to some degree. Klare (1963 and 1974-1975) indicates that there are three ways to think about readability: One way focuses on the legibility of print. This aspect is handled well and the research is clear (Tinker, 1963). A second way of assessing readability centers on the interestability of the materials. This aspect is poorly researched, perhaps because interest changes dynamically, almost minute by minute within individuals. Interest is a psychological problem involving dynamic change. Berieter (1963, p.3) indicates, "Procedural decisions in the measurement of change assume, with discouraging insistence, the characteristics of dilemmas, choices between equally undesirable alternatives." The third aspect of readability involves the degree of linguistic complexity, an area that is well researched but subject to considerable error.

How well do publishers handle the third aspect of readability, linguistic complexity? In most instances, probably, it is not handled well. Mills and Richardson (1963) surveyed major publishers of children's reading materials. They found publishers divided on their viewpoints with respect to the use of readability formulas. They found some publishers rejected the idea completely.

A second piece of evidence involves the materials themselves. How do the materials appear when subjected to assessment by formula? Kachuck (1975) found stories in basal readers varied and did not progress from easy to hard in consistent fashion.

A third kind of evidence centers on the kind of language used which in turn reflects the ways basal readers are constructed. It is possible that the major controlling device used to establish difficulty levels is vocabulary. This is very noticeable at the lower grade levels where extremely limited vocabulary produces a curious, almost uninterpretable form of syntax that makes it necessary for the story lines to be carried almost entirely by pictures in many instances.

Sensible Principles

Our speculations seem negative, indeed. How should basal-reading series be constructed? First, they ought to reflect sound educational principles. Second, the stories should progress from easy to hard as teachers assume they do. Third, promotional materials should not mislead teachers into thinking that the manuals can be followed without making crucial teaching decisions. Fourth, how well the materials sell should not be used as the only measure of how good the series really is. Fifth, no one should assume that the purchase, adoption, and possession of a basal-reader series is evidence that teachers are carrying out what is prescribed in the basal reader teachers' manuals.

The publishers have not been cast in a good light in the preceding remarks, and that is not totally fair. We, as educators, need the publishing industry. We can not castigate publishers for providing what we as teachers say we want, and that is what they probably are doing. To be responsible, education today is going to have to require that preparation for teaching reading exceed the minimal requirements. This is a tall order for teacher-preparation institutions, but nothing short of it will do. The difficulties with teachers' decisions and basal-reader series teachers' manuals is an educational problem and educators are going to have to provide the solutions if reading instruction is to be improved.

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